

2015

Echo 2015 - Complete Issue

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the echo²⁰¹⁵



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The Echo has a rich history as an esteemed publication of student literary and art works. As a part of Furman's effort to promote intellectual creativity amongst the student body, the magazine is a display of such academic and artistic excellence. *The Echo* is both by the students and for the students of Furman, with a vision to uphold this tradition of publishing authors and artists. In addition to the print issue, you can view this edition and previous editions of *The Echo* online at Furman University's Scholar Exchange (scholarexchange.furman.edu). We hope you enjoy this collection.

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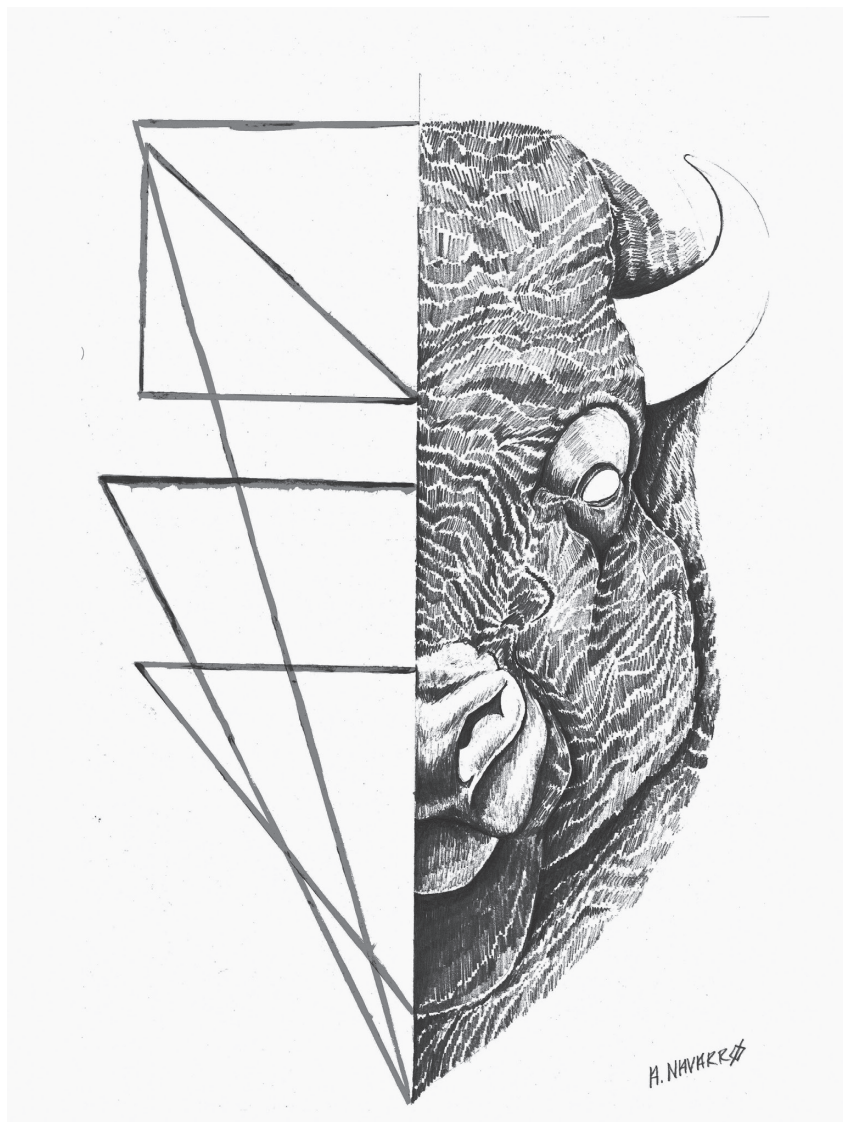
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Handmade. Digital Photography. Margaret Rogers



Bright Skies. Digital Photography. Eric Clammage



Geobison. Graphite, Water Color. Aaron Blake Navarro



Where's Joe? Digital Photography. Kristen Murdaugh



Asino. Digital Photography. Margaret Rogers

Stardust

Britt Viergever

Winner of Editor's Choice Award

poetry

I learned in biology class
that the material that makes
the great coral reefs
is the same that makes our
skeletons.

And I couldn't stop thinking.
I thought about how God
must have kept star dust
on His holy fingers
as he knitted our human forms.

That the brightness behind
your glorious smile
must have the traces
of millennia old goldmines.

That maybe my joints
are bound together
by some antediluvian strands
of comet tails.

So at the beginning of time,
as the constellations sped away from each other
and went on to fleck the freckles on our faces
they must have waited for us
to come back together.

The Beginning

Will Clark

You know what happened in the beginning.
You remember the Sunday School lesson
too many times repeated. The Lord spoke,
His Word glowed in its goodness.

In the morning God became a gardener,
a fact your mother always took too much to heart,
sweating long summers in care of her sunflowers
and zinnias. The whole world bloomed beautiful,
limbs all heavy with unforbidden fruit.

He created the fish next--bream and bass, mostly--
and all the birds, the ruby-throated hummingbird
you admired with your mother from the porch,
the crows you chased from her garden.

Then He made man, in His image.
You were told this was the important part.
You learned what the word “overseer” meant, and you wondered
what subduing anything had to do with loving it.

Taming my Childhood

Mary Shelton Hornsby

I walked in my polka-dot shorts down
The best part of town:
The street beside Mr. Farmer's house,
And I watched as the shadows shifted
Under my laced-up feet and
I saw golden sunshine filtering through
The white picket fence like a kaleidoscope,
Creating patterns on the street that wound spirals
Around the curving cul-de-sac.
And I thought of neon pink and yellow stamps
And getting a splinter in my foot on the gray-painted porch
That got sticky because my lemon popsicle melted down the stairs.
And of course I remember my little brother sticking his green
Paintbrush in his mouth because he mistook it for his own
Popsicle sitting there on the hot stone terrace.
And I knew that only a Master of the Seasons
Could comprehend so much in one short hour.
And as I kept walking, I passed Mr. Farmer's
Screened porch and Mr. Farmer on his screened
Porch, and, as I waved, I also glimpsed him
Reading something by Mark Twain who
I knew would understand how I felt
Which is how I knew that, even
Though summer was so short,
And it was hard to pack in
Everything I wanted
To do before the
End, I had still
Taken over
The world.

Our Deepest Sympathies

A Pantoum

Kimberly Hydrick

Oh, Honey, I'm so sorry about your loss.
You look just like her, you know?
I can't even imagine how you must be feeling.
She was always so kind.

You look just like her, you know?
I see so much of her in you.
She was always so kind.
I've known her for years.

I see so much of her in you.
It's such a comfort to know she's not really gone.
I've known her for years.
Things will be so different now.

It's such a comfort to know she's not really gone.
Oh, Honey, I'm so sorry about your loss.
Things will be so different now.
She was always so kind.

An Ode to John Keats

Michelle Rash

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness
pains my sense, as your poetry I read.
To loathe your overwhelming poesy hath my heart decreed.
My spirit, too weak; thy diction, too deep,
I am not even permitted the gentle luxury to weep.
Thou speaks of Arcady and Attica and Greece,
Of love and war and paradox, in which I find no peace.
I was once full of sweet dreams and quiet breathing,
Then poetry abounded, the importance of which I found deceiving.
I linger in the soul-searching despair of the tomb,
Hoping Hemingway or Twain will emerge from the gloom.
Authors of straightforward narrative, of prose!
Not as if you could ever recognize those.
At least by your profound questioning, your mind appears to be alight,
Your queries are most significant, such as “Why Did I Laugh Tonight?”
You write of a golden-tongued Siren with lute -
If I spoke like that, I’d prefer to be mute.
Dryads and faeries amuse you to no end,
After pages of this, even Meyers is a godsend.
Yes, a thing of beauty is a joy forever;
Yet your poems are counted in this category approximately never.
As my mental end draws near, I have but one request
Give me Dickens or give me death!

The Pen, The Trigger

Hayden Arrington

The subjects are far too controversial
for ordinary conversations and
that's why he disguises them.
He dresses them up in fancy diction,
in petticoats laced with lies,
in shoes soled hard with fiction,
and he send them off to war like tiny suicide bombers -
just waiting for them to explode in argument.
His greatest weapon is opinion and he can twist it,
program it, and dial it until
his work of art is ticking.

He will pull the trigger and watch that mushroom cloud
where convention used to be.
Some call him murderer, others call him terrorist,
setting fire to controversy.

He calls himself poet.

Homeless

Cory Bailey

If you asked “What’s your name?” I wouldn’t look up
at the five fingers overhead,
nod hello, and go back to doing whatever
nothing I was calling something,
because no one asks the name of
the man in whose cup they throw their spare
change. If they asked for a smile or a symbol,
I’d hand them whatever I found in my coat:
a bus ticket, a receipt, the shadow of a
blackbird, a brochure on God.
Once he gave me a sandwich, some kid, he was
eating after school. I remember the relish
I didn’t like but ate anyway as
he watched the hole in my coat,
the stain on my pants, the ash in my eye,
the grease in my hair. And when he held out his palm,
I flipped him a coin in return only to have his
five fingers overhead.
Rattle. Pulse. Stop.
I wish I could drink the coin’s molten metal, copper in my throat,
thirst quenched and branded on my insides: Universe.
I remember a dog sat beside my
Plague-fire throne, and she
stayed a while. Four paws overhead.
It was June, so June she was, naïve pantomime,
attracting five more fingers overhead.
June became winter and June was no more.
The snow dusted me for hours
while silence sat in my arms doing

whatever nothing I called something.
If you call the sound of water—rain, tears,
flood, storm—silence.
But it didn't bother me because I'm a man
In love—in love with the rattle at the bottom of my cup.
In love with the rose fingers that flip a coin
my way. In love with rain and silence that blush my coat.
Amór I call my bench, my bed in the park,
Warmed by the June—sun.
Wife I call the loaf I buy each week,
hard with the wind, but soft inside without
disappointment. But don't think me a promiscuous man,
For my one true love is the stars.
My ballroom is the cup, my nothing the marble,
crystal moon the chandelier. Forged in gilded
loafers of age-old charity, season is my Elysian
partner. For as I lay on my lover in the park each
night, I look up at the stars and imagine in space
they must be homeless too.

Rabbit Wrangling

Michaela Barnett

creative nonfiction

The weeping willow that housed bunny school rested on a small divot on the north side of our country pond. The willow's branches, clad in fronds as soft as feathers, swept the ground in a circle around its trunk and created the perfect summer fort to train the baby rabbits born on our farm that spring. On that soft carpet of grass, I learned the art of rabbit taming from the school's founder and headmistress herself, my older sister Kelsey. It felt like a fearsome honor, as I was the youngest rabbit wrangling neophyte since bunny school's inception.

As the youngest of four children, my earliest task on our farm was the care of our show rabbits. My older sisters were tasked with the more laborious chores of horse care and barn maintenance, which they completed without complaint while I grouched about my own work. They toiled in the horse stalls, shoveling manure from the sawdust bedding laid the day before, freshly soiled with the acrid smell of urine. They lugged five-gallon buckets of water, threw hay from the upper loft, distributed feed, brought the horses in from pasture, and swept the long rubber mats that lined the inner corridor of the barn. Meanwhile, I dawdled, meandering in and out of the rabbit hutches, knowing that the time I spent watering and feeding our small pets was time I didn't have to spend on the more difficult and dirty tasks. I dreaded the day that came once a month when I would have to strip the layers of rabbit dung from underneath their pens and scatter lime and fresh sawdust in place of the removed manure. When this day inevitably arrived, I cajoled and complained and waited sufficiently long for my sisters to finish their own chores and help me with my once-monthly tribulation. I was a rabbit governess, after all, and I belonged in the sweet-smelling schoolyard training my wards, not in the dark corner of the barn, scraping out poop.

The real magic occurred only when the nitty-gritty of daily care was finished and, even then, only in seasons. In the months that ushered spring into summer, we trained our rabbits for the months that would pull summer into fall. My sister, chief rabbit wrangler, would slip out to the cover of the weeping willow to ready the school for the day's instruction. I would come a few minutes later, bearing babies softer than smooth velvet tucked anywhere I could carry them, cradled under my arms and balanced beneath my chin. If the sheer quantity exceeded my capacity to embrace, I would fetch a wicker basket and emerge from the barn, a perfect image of country childhood nostalgia with my basket full of bunnies.

The first lesson of the curriculum obliged the babies to recognize the weeping willow as their home base whenever outside of their hutch. To this end, we started at the willow and each day placed them farther and farther away, encouraging them with treats and cheers until they bounded back to their schoolmarms and mates. Before long, I would no longer need to carry our students to class. I could set them down right outside the barn and they would lope the hundred feet, without any coaching, to where my sister waited. In our self-proclaimed schoolyard, we taught our young charges to hop in a line around the base of the trunk, bunny-butt to nose. When they accomplished this (after weeks of instruction), we proclaimed them playing "Ring Around the Rosie" and would cheer our own teaching aptitude. Some of our rabbits were tree climbers, a novelty in the leporine world. When we placed them in a crook of the willow, the slightest bit of upward movement was touted as proof of their special abilities and merited extra attention during free time.

By the time our babies turned to adolescents, it was fair time. Each fall, my three sisters and I donned our white medical coats, embroidered with dark green four leaf clovers and club affiliations, and swept the county and state fair's Dutch and Mini Rex divisions, as well as each age bracket's showmanship category. It is rumored in some counties of Ohio that families with children of similar age turned to showing other breeds, so as not to compete against the four formidable sisters. Victory was sweet and filled me with a childish pride I could not yet disguise in polite deferrals, but the county check with earnings gained from championships which came weeks later was sweeter. It was the first money I ever earned, but the satisfaction of that first paycheck held none of the riches I gained under the branches of the weeping willow, playing with my older sister and a troupe of baby bunnies.

The Purple Beauty

Chrissy Reinemund

Winner of Editor's Choice Award

They came in boxes. Thirty or forty of them, piled up by the back door, waiting. The first few I opened carried red, and then green – and then, purple. There it was: the purple pepper, the strangest vegetable I'd ever seen. Stranger than the stalks of Brussels sprouts strung like light bulbs or the artichokes sitting in baskets like lizard's feet. I picked up the pepper and held it, turned it, smelled it, and pressed it. The pepper felt as sturdy as bone. It smelled fiery – as a pepper should – and its stem was a vivid green. It sat in my hand as a queen would upon a throne. And so I placed the purple peppers in front of the other produce – the other produce – where all could see. Behold, the purple pepper.

I remember many things from the summer after my freshman year of college, but mostly, I remember the purple pepper. In Colorado, summer mornings are early and cold and quiet. Along the Yampa River in Steamboat Springs, there is a giant wooden painted tomato sign that reads "Sweet Pea Market & Restaurant." It's a quaint little place, but on a good day, the line at the hostess stand loops around the block. If I wasn't standing at the hostess stand, I was inside the market unpacking boxes and stocking shelves with vegetables. I performed the most mundane of tasks: bussing tables, mopping floors, rolling silverware into scratchy paper napkins and pushing buttons on cash registers, picking up crayons from under tables and carrying trays to and from the kitchen, where the cooks and dishwashers sweated without air conditioning, and where I once stabbed my hand on the ticket nail. The side of my right thumb on my good hand, the one that balanced trays and cleaned tables, was slashed open and bled onto the counter. It took an entire box of Band-Aids and the rest of the summer to heal. Now that I think of it, I probably should have gotten stitches. But I remember the purple peppers most. After they arrived, unpacking boxes was a thrill, like opening a door to a long-awaited lover – but they only came once.

It grows as any other pepper would. It is any other pepper, only

picked early: as it ripens, its color turns from the glorious purple to the monotonous red that rolls and falls from grocery store shelves. This is the only fact I knew about the purple pepper. (Later, I would learn that the purple pepper could turn green, too.) I had only known peppers to be green, red, yellow, orange. When I arranged the peppers in a color-coordinating line, customers reached for the purple. They picked it up as I first did, holding it up to the light as if it were a kaleidoscope.

“What a beautiful pepper!” A young woman said, her hands cradling the vegetable (which some, in fact, argue to be a fruit).

“Now, what makes it purple?” She turned to me.

“It has the same antioxidant as a blueberry.” I don’t know why I said it. I think I read it somewhere, but later research would prove this statement a myth – and me, a liar. But I was a good saleswoman nonetheless: her eyes widened, and she brought the purple pepper over to the register. This was how I sold the purple pepper.

One day in late June, at table 14, the table closest to the river and most envied table in the restaurant, a man sitting at three o’clock ordered the beet salad. It came served with a warm crouton and a dollop of goat cheese, teetering and tottering dangerously atop the greens. On my way down the stairs and out the door, the crouton carrying the goat cheese dollop tumbled off of the arugula, smeared against the edge of the plate, and landed in a creamy mess at my feet. I saw no point in picking the thing up. My hands were full – and one plate balanced on my wrist – and knowing the stubborn cook, another crouton would take 15 minutes, if I were lucky. As the terrible waitress I was, I continued on my way, prepared to deliver the beet salad without the crouton and goat cheese dollop.

“But where is the warm crouton with goat cheese?” I should have known. I blushed, pretended I hadn’t noticed, apologized, and returned the plate to the kitchen before picking up the demolished crouton on the ground. In the market, the purple pepper sat purpler than ever. Unfailingly, someone stood in awe of the vegetable (or fruit) before taking it and holding it at eye-level, and then up to the light.

“This pepper is purple,” a man told me.

“Indeed it is.” I don’t know how many purple peppers I sold in one day. I will tell you this: I sold more purple peppers than I did beet salads.

Another day, my boss and I searched for a rat. It had been eating our produce, sneaking into boxes and gobbling up tomatoes and potatoes. Katherine, my boss, was thin and hardheaded, and she drank a gin and tonic at the end of each shift. She had opened a box of heirloom tomatoes one afternoon to find a rat sitting in the mangled scraps of yellow, red, and gold flesh. She screamed a mournful scream, as if someone or something dear had died; and I suppose, in a way, something had. “My heirlooms!” I’d never heard her voice above a certain pitch.

If a box contained one tainted vegetable, we were to throw away the entire box. I was determined to find the rat – not because a rat is bad news for a restaurant, but because a rat is bad news for the purple peppers.

We set traps. In the kitchen, in the basement, behind the ice box, behind the bar. And then the rat found its way behind the bar. It squealed and scratched, and so Dave, the bartender, took a wooden board from under the sink and killed the rat. I yelped. It took a few whacks from the wooden board to stop it from squealing. I remembered my brother, Steven, failing to check the rearview mirror and running over the dog. I was too young; all I knew was the sound was the most awful sound I’d ever heard, so I stood by the door and kept opening it and slamming it shut to muffle the howls of the dog. Eventually, the squealing and scratching stopped. But we had to leave the rat there behind the bar, a nasty and bloody mound of wet white fur, until the customers had left the deck. We left it there for hours, and I laid an old rag over the thing, then shuddered and scrubbed my hands.

I scrubbed my hands clean. I checked the boxes of purple peppers – there were only a few left – with a terrible fear of finding one bitten into. I did not find a tainted purple pepper. I imagine though, if I did, I would’ve refused to throw the entire box away. What would I have done with it? Taken the box home and watched the purple turn to red.

×

Peter Piper picked a peck of purple peppers. The purple pepper is picky. It cannot be too cold, it cannot be too hot; you must pick it, eat it or cook it just at the right time: somewhere in between youth and full maturity. Of course, this is assuming you want your pepper to be purple. It could be green and it could be red. All peppers begin green, except some varieties of the purple pepper. The Black Pearl ornamental pepper,

for example, begins with blooms of lavender flowers before sprouting purple peppers that will turn red if left on the vine. But take the Merlot purple pepper, which begins green when planted, and within 2 or 3 weeks turns entirely white. Within another 3 weeks, the pepper takes on stripes of dark purple – and then, in 2 months, a gorgeous inky purple drapes the whole body of the pepper, like night. Cut it open, and its flesh is a piercing green. But the pepper that came by the hundreds in boxes and that I arranged on shelves, the Purple Beauty, begins purple and stays purple if harvested early. Leave it on the vine or sitting pretty long enough and it will turn red – blushing or angry from neglect, I can't decide – but chop it and cook it, and it turns green with heat. It is a moody vegetable (or fruit), the purple pepper. But there is no evidence proving it contains the same antioxidant as the blueberry.

In July, an older woman in the store told me the pepper reminded her of a chameleon. She had pulled her hair into a giant clip on the back of her neck, and it fell in wisps from her ears. I was describing to her the maturation process of the Merlot variety: green, then white, then stripes, then inky.

“A chameleon. A chameleon of a vegetable,” she said. I can't remember what exactly she said next, but it was something about wishing her skin could change colors, like the chameleon's. She laughed and I laughed and then she bought three peppers. I failed to tell her they could turn green.

Every day, a man came in carrying a small plastic bag and a leather wallet. He wore suspenders and a green ball cap. He never so much as glanced in the direction of the purple pepper, not even when she sat in the neat line with the green, red, yellow, and orange peppers. At first I felt insulted for the purple pepper, the queen of the produce; she'd become accustomed to people lifting her up to the light. But she is a humble vegetable. And sitting there in line with her different colors, she knows her beauty to be fleeting. I knew then that I could not set her too far away from the other peppers.

The man made a beeline for the container of salted peanuts, took the plastic scoop, and then turned slowly to me as I sat behind the register and watched from a distance. I always occupied myself with one of my mundane tasks when he came in, so as not to spoil the routine that we both understood to be as such – and to not rush the man, because he was quite old, and his hands trembled when he held the plastic scoop.

So I'd write produce labels that had already been written or break coin wrappers against the counter. He never said anything, though sometimes I thought he would; instead, he would move his mouth in different lines, some resembling a smile, but I never could tell. I went over to the man.

"Salted peanuts today?" It was always salted peanuts, but I asked anyway. He pointed to the container in a jerky motion. His head made the same jerky nod as his finger, and I interpreted the line of his mouth to be a smile. He handed me the plastic bag and the scoop, and I poured the peanuts into the grinder, closed the lid, and held the bag while we watched the peanuts grind into butter.

×

I didn't believe the purple pepper would turn green. So I took one from the box one day, the firmest one I could find, and sat it on the counter at home while I heated a pan with oil. Now, I had never learned how to properly cut a bell pepper, but I knew the stem must go; so I chopped the two ends off and looked at the headless Purple Beauty. I sliced it lengthwise and the pepper let out a satisfying snap before rolling onto its side. I wasn't quite sure where to make the next cut, so I peeled back the pepper and took out the core and seeds with my hands. (I later learned this was not the correct method, but it worked just fine.) Then I chopped the Purple Beauty into thin strips and placed them in the pan: sizzle and pop, the most divine sound I've ever heard. It took four or five minutes before they began to turn green, slowly, starting at the tips and then working to the ends, while I paced back and forth and watched. At the slightest hue of green, I stopped and waited. Miraculous.

×

How to Cut a Bell Pepper:

Cut off the top of the pepper at the stem. Inside, you will see its ribs.

Cut off the other end of the pepper and set it upright.

Making sure your fingers are out of the way, make one perpendicular cut through one side of the pepper.

Turn the pepper onto its back, and move the knife through the inside of the pepper to remove its ribs and seeds.

Lay the pepper flat, and julienne or dice it into thin strips.

×

By August, the purple peppers had gone. We kept the boxes stacked by the back door or under the produce tables, and one day there

were none. I searched the fridge, under the shelves, and in the back rooms, hoping perhaps someone had misplaced them. I asked Katherine where they had gone.

“We sold them all at the Farmer’s Market,” she said. She was thrilled – as she should have been, one Purple Beauty selling at \$2.00 per pound, almost as much as the heirloom tomatoes – but my tasks now became more mundane than usual. On the same day, I pitted cherries for cherry pie. I wore an apron, but I still left the restaurant covered in what looked like blood. I thought the stains appropriate, and I came home to my mother, whose face drained of color when she saw me. Like a chameleon, I suddenly thought.

“The purple peppers are gone,” I told her. I wanted to cry out, as Katherine had cried over the spoiled heirlooms.

Later that week, the old man in suspenders and a ball cap walked through the door and made a beeline for the salted peanuts. I began to study the price list. And then, “Where’s that purple pepper?” He shuffled his feet and turned his whole body to me, because, I presumed, his neck was too stiff to turn only his head.

“The purple peppers? We sold them all.” And he stood looking at me, his mouth making an odd motion – as if trying to form some distant, far-off word. Then he grunted and took the plastic scoop. Of course he had noticed the purple pepper, I thought. It’s a purple pepper, for heaven’s sake.

The Ice Cream Man

Laura Brown Bardin

My cotton t-shirt had a black and gold tobacco leaf painted on the front, which clung to me, as did everything I touched. Sweat rolled down my arms, tanned from the summer of waitressing and working outdoors. I brushed hair out of my eyes yet again, squinting against the setting sun. A white cooler entered into the corner of my vision, swinging back and forth due to the precarious nature of the individuals toting it. It brought a simple message. He had arrived. He was infamous, in a way. A recurring theme in my summers, first in childhood, and now, here in the beginning of my young adulthood, he strangely reappeared. His ragged t-shirt and greasy ball cap gave him the appearance of having just stepped off a tractor. Which he had. The cigarette, painting gray on the surrounding sunset sky, was a crumpled sign of the toll nature had taken on this man's life and reminded me of when I'd first met him, summers ago. He climbed into his pickup truck and waved to his daughter and me as we peered back at him through the mesh enclosure of the trampoline in their backyard. He was living a life in a neighborhood. Suburban perhaps, but not at the core. Daily trips out to the farm were necessary, yet he always returned to his wife and family in the suburbs. Now, he was a full-time farmer. The wife was still in the suburbs. The children were scattered, chasing their own dreams, blending their paved and dirt passions into one mix, tangled but tangible.

"Hey. You work earlier today?" was the typical greeting I received as he passed by me with his ice cream. "Yeah I did, sure was hot out there. Glad to be here at the ballpark now, though, and away from all the people I had to wait on today." A nod of empathetic agreement was thrown in my general direction as he pushed gallons of ice cream up on the top shelf. Their white plastic containers meshed with the sterile shelving, a bland camouflage against the hues of green the clientele approaching the counter wore. "Might rain later." "Think so?" "Yep." "Hope not." Another shrug.

I never cared much for listening to the weatherman. I'd rather just look at the sky. Yet out here, the ice cream man could predict what was coming, clouds and customers, the gift of years in a field. It was still sunny as could be, but he said rain. I wanted to know which life experience he was drawing that conclusion from, but never got the chance. Our weather conversation was interrupted by a man who asked me for a roster of all the players. I dug one out from the depths of my booth, halfway watching the sky, and halfway watching the guest. He took the roster and headed to a seat above home base.

The crack of wooden bats echoed behind my head; the innings blurred together. The crowd was thin enough that I could see straight out the front gate from my booth, past the box office and into the neighborhood that had fallen on hard times. The home of the all-American pastime was situated right in the middle of rows and rows of individuals rocking on front porches for whom the American dream had left much to dream about and little to show for it.

Smoke filled my lungs, and I looked up into his face. He leaned on my booth and blew the smoke carelessly in whatever direction seemed easiest to turn his head. We would people watch and talk. About cotton, the latest flavor of ice cream, his daughter's new apartment, whatever topic popped up. As I told stories of my encounters with jetsetters at my country club day job, he would tell me of the entitled individuals he had to work for daily. The crops demanded attention, in the early morning and late into the night, like small children, susceptible to the great big world, with all its predators. He battled the invasions of bugs, spraying them into oblivion, and sought to keep the cotton in line despite its unruly personality. His greatest tool was the only thing that did run like a deer, the infamous John itself. I could visualize the array of green and yellow that weaved together, blurring the lines between crop and machinery as it crept down the straight rows.

We were shooting the breeze in harmony, yet we both had jobs to do. I was to help solve the problems that arose. The go-to person for bee stings, lost children, complaints, and general questions. He was to bring the pleasure that comes from the taste of homemade ice cream to everyone who walked through the gates of Fleming Stadium, piling up the green bills they slid under the glass in exchange for a Styrofoam cup. We strived to seem like a best friend to every new customer. Our jobs didn't fade with the setting of the sun behind the distant trees, or with

the hurricane like rainstorms. Come thunder, lightning, hail, people locked in the bathroom, a fourth of July mob, the game goes on. And with that, so do the dessert and demands.

We were a support system of sorts. He was there to ease the tension of my blushed stammering when a young man I'd never met asked me out on a date and continued shameless flirting. I was there when he discovered one night's vandalism had included the theft of several gallons of his pride and joy. Neighborhood kids apparently wanted in on the pleasure as well, choosing the most popular flavors to cool off their bodies and taste buds from the relentless summer heat.

So we continued, the ice cream man and me. I'd set up my booth and then look over to see the flicker of jumbled Christmas tree lights that adorned the outside of his stand. When they were turned on, he was in the building. His assistants would promote the ice cream while he would wander and talk to friends like me, people watching. And smoking. After checking the status of his nightly sales, he would slide the dirty cooler into the bed of his big white truck and roll off into the darkness, diesel whining until the crack of the bats started up again the next night.

Tree of Life

Michaela Barnett

“Wait, you haven’t heard the placenta story?” I’ll ask, incredulous, while those familiar with the tale roll their eyes or grimace in anticipation. I really need to collect new material if I become stupefied when someone doesn’t know the intimacies of my afterbirth origin story. I throw myself headlong into the telling of it, a classic with all the elements that make up a good party story: intrigue, surprise, and a complex cast of characters that include Carol, my rotund, alcoholic maternal grandmother, my hippy mother, and my ever-pragmatic father. Grandma comes complete with black, tattooed eyebrows that are just askew enough to paint her face in a perpetual state of confusion and surprise and a morbidly obese Chihuahua, Tuxedo, always in tow.

I start by capturing my audience with a good hook, like when I tell my story of the one night I spent in jail or how my mom once thought she lived through the Holocaust (she didn’t). What could be more captivating than the mucous membrane that allowed me to exist for nine months in the womb? Many things, but I usually charge ahead despite (or because of) the aghast faces that stare at me. I chalk it up to engrossment in the tale and use it as encouragement to continue, though now as I reflect upon their strained faces, they might rather be masks of supplication, begging me to stop.

“So, I and all of my sisters were born at home, except for my oldest sister Megan. My mom had a pretty traumatic experience in the hospital with her, where she felt like she couldn’t control the situation, which, as a pregnant woman giving birth for the first time, is just about the worst thing. For the rest of us, she decided to do at-home births where she could feel cared for and bring life into the world the way she wanted.” This part of the story elicits two types of responses. The first: *You were born at home? People still do that? Were there doctors?* Yes, yes, yes, and a midwife. The second: *That’s neat.*

“She actually made the news in Chicago for being the first at home VBAC,” I’ll inject, inserting some power of fame into the story. *Veeback? What’s that?*

“Vaginal Birth After Caesarean.” Then, when my audience’s faces are still contorted by the word ‘vagina,’ I bring us back down. “So my oldest sister, Megan, was born in the hospital, and Lindy was born at home in Chicago, and then my sister Kelsey and I were both born in the house I grew up in all my life. So my parent’s bedroom was where I began.” In more ways than one.

“My mom was a total hippy, right? Grew stuff on the farm, had home births, all that.” I start to feel real rapport with my listeners at this stage of the telling. They’re transfixed and I’m grinning like a Cheshire cat, ready to drop plot bombs around the corner of every sentence. *Dear god, please tell me your mother did not eat the placenta.*

“No, none of my family members ate it. Not even a nibble. But when I was born, my parents wanted to plant my placenta with a tree that would become my life tree. Very beautiful, symbolic; the substance that fed me while I was still in utero would feed a tree that would grow and be my tree. My life creating more life.” I gesture with my hands at this point, crafting trees out of the air.

“The only problem is, I was born in November. In Ohio. When the ground is frozen. So they couldn’t plant a tree, because besides the tree just straight dying in the ground, they wouldn’t even be able to dig a hole. You’re not getting a shovel into that frozen sod, I tell ya!” I’m growing more animated at this point, but most of my audience is either suburban or city-born folk. They aren’t as tickled as I am about the notion of digging a hole outside in the dead of winter to plant something. I charge on.

“What do you do with a placenta you can’t plant for five or six months? You freeze it.” *Your placenta was in the freezer for six months? Please let this be the weird climax to the story.*

“Well, my grandma came up from Texas to help my mom with the three older girls while my mom was recuperating from, you know, birthing a child. And I was a big baby. My mom actually thought she was having twins at one point when my shoulders squeezed out . . . but that’s another story. The birthing story’s a classic too,” I chuckle to myself. *Is she going to make us listen to the birthing story after she finishes whatever this is?*

“My grandma’s not a domestic lady. This is the same woman who made soup one time and when we asked for some, refused us. It was for

her dog, obviously. The same woman who forgot we were coming one year for Christmas and gave us pens – like writing utensil ball-bearing pens – for Christmas. So my dad comes home from work one day to find the placenta thawing in a bowl in the sink.” My audience gets anxious. *It’s a trap! She was lying to us when she told us no one in her family ate the placenta.*

“So my dad asks her, ‘Carol, what are you doing?’ and she tells him, ‘I just thought I would get dinner ready, and I found some meat in the freezer and thought we could cook it tonight. *What is it, anyway?*’” *What does a placenta look like? I’m not eating meat for a week.*

“My dad redirected, grabbed some frozen beef or something else, and spirited the placenta back into the freezer, into the depths where no one would find it. They never told my grandma she almost made us placenta. Can you believe it? At least, when I told her this story a few years ago she had no idea. But maybe that was just the eyebrows.” *This family is weird.* They begin to inch away, mistakenly believing that my origin story has come to an end.

“Wait! You’ll never guess. When spring finally came and they planted my life tree with the placenta...” I pause in anticipation of the finale. *Please just tell us.*

“The tree died! My placenta killed it. Bad omen, huh?”



Texas Galaxy. Digital Photography. Laura Krueger
Winner of Editor's Choice Award



Galapagos Crab. Digital Photography. Cassie Wodecki



A Crack in Time. Digital Photography. Cory Bailey



Train Tracks to Birkenau. Digital Photography. Cassie Wodecki



Crossing Paths. Digital Photography. Alissa Willmerdinger



38 Mother Earth I. Digital Photography. Aaron Blake Navarro



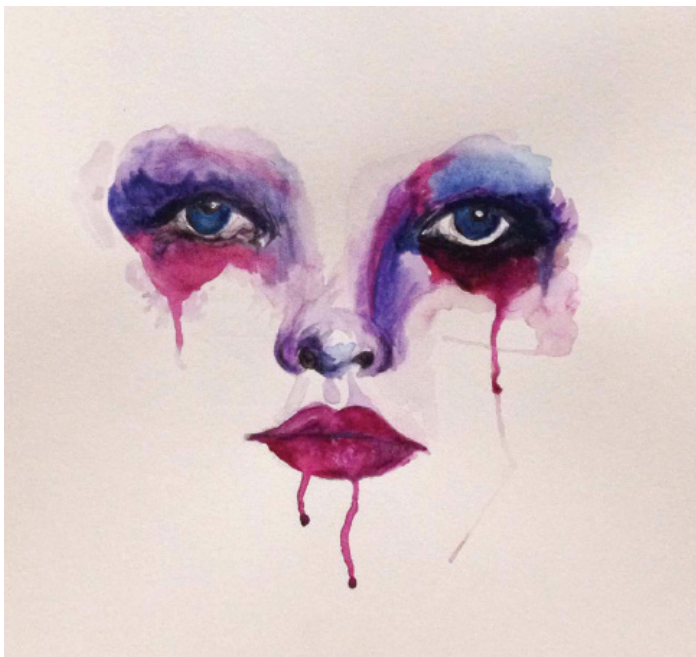
Kiko. Oil Painting. Allison Shoemaker



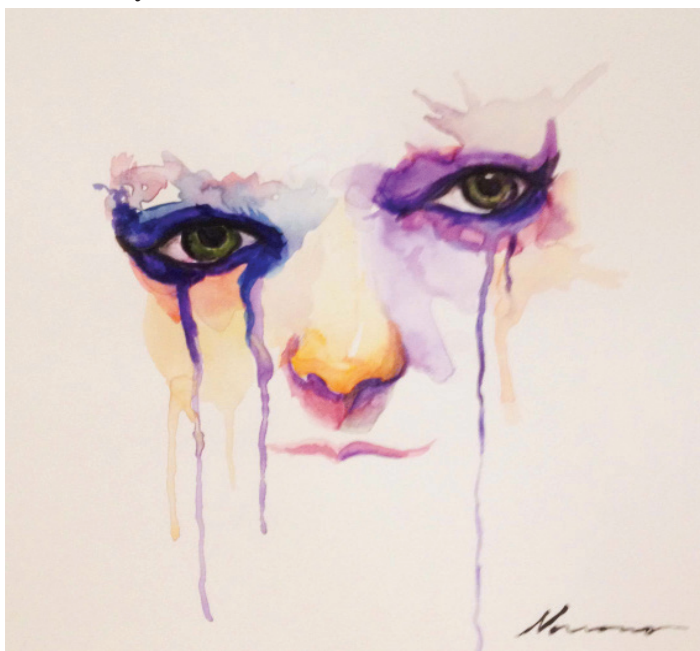
Windy City. Digital Photography. Eric Clammage



Neighborhood in Capetown. Digital Photography. Cassie Wodecki



Emotion Study I. Water Color and Tea. Aaron Blake Navarro



42 Emotion Study II. Water Color and Tea. Aaron Blake Navarro



Regard. Digital Photography. Amy Poon



Stage view, Globe Theater. Digital Photography. Abigail MacDougall



Brooklyn Bridge. Digital Photography. Zach Wong



Space Jam. Digital Photography. Kristen Murdaugh



I Know Why the Caged Bird Dusts. Digital Photography. Ivy White



Finding Myself: Macchu Piccu. Digital Photography. L. Victoria Ferrer

Blaze

Luke Christie

Winner of Editor's Choice Award

fiction

It was like Sodom and Gomorrah. A whole county laid to waste because of the sins of a faithless people. Surely, it was the work of the Devil but just as surely it was God's work too because sometimes He lets the Devil run wild among folks who rightly deserve it, among those who have forgotten that a God and a Devil even exist and that the only reason the Devil doesn't obliterate every single one of their snarling, sniveling faces is because the God is more powerful and loves his imperfect human creatures more than any of them love each other. Even more than they love themselves, which is really saying something, seeing as all they ever do is stop and stare in front of mirrors, clothing themselves in vanity and satisfying the lust in their hearts and souls.

But even God gets fed up sometimes and then He says, Devil, just go on and commence for these people on Earth the suffering and damnation that awaits them in eternity. I've had it! You can have this lot. They're all yours. He promised Noah he would never destroy the world by flood again, but he said nothing about fire and, technically speaking, He could even use flood if He wanted to, because we're not talking about the whole world here. We're just talking about Blanchett County -- a wretched, forest-pocked few hundred acres of old plantation homes, termite-infested slave-shacks-turned-tenement-housing, and businesses of the usual sort: hardware store, general store, pharmacy... only one of each so that their greedy owners has a complete monopoly over his industry.

About the only establishments with any sort of competition are the churches, which is nothing but a sorry joke seeing as attendance last Sunday topped out at 36 and that many only showed up because of the fires. I don't presume to know exactly what they were searching for but if they wanted to hear that God would put out the flames and restore their homes and their riches, they left disappointed because they sure didn't hear it from me. I stood tall in the pulpit and declared that the only flames being put out were the ones in their hearts and

these they'd put out themselves. Oh God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He does not forsake those who fear Him. He giveth back tenfold and more to all who remain steadfast in their faith. But He casts into exile the ungrateful, the unfaithful, the disobedient. And He turns into pillars of salt those who look back.

These days, I'm focusing mostly on my children's sermons. Children understand things differently than adults. They look into the world like it's a crystal ball -- only they see past the swirling mist, past the thunder clouds and the coal smoke, into the simple truth beyond. Somehow, things like miracles and a debt so great it cannot be repaid, a grace so magnificent it has no earthly equal, make sense to them. It's as simple as two plus five equals 5,000. It's as easy as a verse written out on a paper bracelet or set to music, the tune even simpler than the words.

To a child, God can be like the grandparent who picks you up after you trip and skin your knees, whose touch is healing, whose voice is soothing. Or like the second grade teacher who gives you half of her own ham sandwich because Momma worked third shift last night and Daddy came home too drunk to fix your lunch. Or like the sparrow who leads you to a spring when you've been out tumbling in the grass and you tumble too far and you don't know where you are and suddenly you're thirsty and the saltiness of your tears is only making it worse. Ask a child how far away God is and they'll tell you He's just at the end of that chain made of white and purple construction paper links, or they'll scrunch a little hand over their tiny beating heart and say He's right here, inside, knocking. Ask a child to show you God and he'll pull out that cheap plastic mirror in the popsicle frame he painted in Sunday school, tell you to just look and you'll see God's reflection. Ask a child what she has to do to get into Heaven and she'll say Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and show you the picture she drew of two paths in a wood, one zig-zaggy and going every which way, the other straight and narrow with a gold star sticker at the end, "GOD" written next to it in sprawling crayon.

But then they grow up and all the wonder leaves their eyes. They turn into their parents, too smug or too greedy or too horny to keep from taking that apple from the tree. Their eyes become open to their nakedness but instead of covering themselves in shame, they expose themselves underneath bleachers and in pool house bathrooms, giving

into the same desires that resulted in their coming into the world in the first place.

The children are our last great hope. But they're also our last great tragedy. Try as I might, I can't seem to keep them in that place where candy necklaces and flag football in the cemetery are enough for this lifetime. If they would just keep making crosses out of clay and starting water fights when they're supposed to be washing each other's mud-caked feet, maybe they'd make it Home before the rivers turn to blood and the locusts descend. But like their older brothers and sisters and cousins, they trade their inquisitiveness of mind for an unquenchable curiosity of body.

So what more can be done besides pray for a better way and say good riddance? I guess that's how our species perpetuates itself. I guess that's why the front row always fills up when I call for all the children to come forward. And I guess, so long as the children keep coming down the aisles, there's a chance one of them can be saved from herself. So I keep focusing on my children's sermons. Because the adults, well, they've made their bed and now they have to sleep in it.

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The toilets are filthy. May He forgive me for using his name in vain, but God Almighty I've never seen so much left-behind human waste. Like the men had some sort of contest to see who could miss by the greatest margin and the women had never been shown by their mothers how to rinse out their soiled cloths and use them over again instead of leaving them behind in the garbage pail for every Betty and Susan to see.

My sister tells me they're making a disposable kind now and that's why they're suddenly showing up in every public bathroom from here to Texas. She says it's more sanitary but I don't see how. It seems wasteful to me, the extravagance of it all, going out and buying pads every month when you could just as soon save that nickel or, Heaven forbid, toss it in the collection plate on Sunday. Wasteful. Not to mention downright shameful, a woman airing her impurities out in the open like that.

Three Sundays ago, I preached about dispensing with such frivolities, telling folks that to really please Him, they needed to put a stop to their idolatry, give up all their Golden Calves—their store-bought clothes and their fancy motors. God made man to work the land, to

build for himself the roof he sleeps under, to sew for himself the clothes on his back, to plant and grow and harvest for himself the food he puts on his table. But not the men around here, drinking themselves silly in the taverns all up and down the square, each one betting the others he plays a better game of billiards... sleeping through the somber ringing of the church bells on Sunday mornings... stumbling onto the line ten minutes late, red-eyed and with a two-day's stubble making them look manic, rabid, like soon they'll start frothing at the mouth. And their wives doing the same thing, punching in and taking orders from men not their husbands, leaving their children to roll around naked in the streets. But then they tell me it's all worth it because now they have all sorts of useless gadgets in their houses and expensive sheets on their beds and their boys and girls wear collared shirts and dresses that come plastic-wrapped in the mail.

I fancied it a craze, figured the Devil would have his laugh soon when the factory owners and the bankers finally realized that they'd reaped from Blanchett County all there was to reap, packed up their machines and took their swindle elsewhere, leaving all these backwater folks with homes and clothes and country club memberships they can't afford. But then the Deacons came to me with a proposal for putting electric fans in the sanctuary and I thought, the money changers have come to the temple at last, and I knew I had to turn over their tables and throw them out, make them understand that God's house was no place for the flesh-satisfying commodities of this shattered world.

So I waited until the dead of August, and then I shut up all the windows so it would be hotter than Hell in the sanctuary and, come Sunday morning three weeks ago, I tore my robe from my breast and said with flaming lips, All ye who lust in your hearts after the fashions of this earth, fashions of sin and of sinful men... All ye who now keep your Sears catalog where you once set your Bible... Come forward, fall on your faces and lay that lust to rest in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen!

No one came forward. A gluttonous woman fainted, her blubbering body spilling into the aisle as she tumbled from the pew. A disgraceful man in a straw hat and suspenders shot up from the back row and called for my sacking. And this is how it goes. Once a Savior beloved by all but just as soon as He tries to do for the people what's best for them, they turn on Him and seek the company of criminals and harlots

instead. I could feel the sweat running down the inside of my legs just before a second suspended man hurdled over the front three pews and the passed-out whale woman and tackled me where I stood, grinding his knee into my groin as the stained glass blurred around me.

The floating, rust-colored ring looks like a firebrand. It wouldn't surprise me if it was as permanent as one, seeing as it's had three weeks to solidify and gnaw away at the toilet rim like the Devil's been slowly carving away at these people's souls.

God Almighty, who ever heard of folks striking from a church? First staying away, like without them God wouldn't be able to continue doing His work. Like Jesus Himself was going to come knock down their doors and offer them better wages if they would just come back. Now they've taken to picketing the lawn, chanting some nonsense about how God empowered man to invent electric fans so that His people would suffer no more. The people cried out in hunger and He sent down the manna.

They're out there now. I can hear them. Through the crack in the blinds, I can see Sanders, the Choir Director, carrying a sign that reads, "God deserves better than a bunch of hot air!" Look at them. Out there throwing a damn parade while that crazy bastard runs loose, leaving their homes wide open, practically telling him, Sure! Come on in and light her up! I tell you one thing, this may be God's justice for this sorry town but if it is, then it should be His servant who lays these timbers to rest, not some crackpot fool from Clearwater County.

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The hay bales have been in the basement so long they make a loud snapping sound when I grip the sides and lug them one by one up the stairs. It only takes one match. The flames move through the parched straw like a serpent slithering towards its prey, down the aisles, illuminating the altar steps, like footlights in the old opera house uptown. The glowing tongues lap at the pulpit, growing stronger and taller and stranger somehow, gaining momentum as they burn through the varnish. It's almost beautiful. The sanctuary is alight. Brighter even than high noon on a midsummer's day with every window open. It's radiant. And hot. God Almighty, it's hot.

Our Time

Cory Bailey

Ms. Fresham didn't want to meet with Mary, her boss's daughter. She wanted to conduct the interview herself, and she was seizing at every chance to change Mr. Hawkley's mind. He was on the other end of the phone into which Ms. Fresham was yelling. "Now look here, Mr. Hawkley," she said, "I know time is money, but these are people, real people with real stories." She stood with one hand on the handset and the other on her hip. "This is big. Do you really think this appropriate for a child—your child?" A pause. "Not that there is anything wrong with your daughter in particular, I just mean this case requires special care."

Mr. Hawkley didn't respond. He just gave a sharp sigh. "Mary has been to *YOUR Magazine* before," Ms. Fresham said still on the phone, her voice two octaves lower and three times louder than anyone else's. "She could help you with your paperwork. This story is too important and Mr. Hawkley should never have put me in this situation," Ms. Fresham said to Jones, her receptionist and on-and-off boyfriend, whose face was buried in a stack of papers that made his desk resemble a white fifth avenue.

Jones said, "If you don't want to get sent to his office again, why don't you just let Mary talk to the guy?" He was flipping through her last article, "Daring Dave Saves Dodge Dodging Dog," a short piece on Dave Sanchez's rescue of a stray poodle from traffic.

"She wouldn't let that man speak to meet God for a day," Ms. Fresham said without putting down the phone. "Afraid she'd miss the spotlight or someone might disagree with her."

"No, but what would you do if Mr. Hawkley decided he needed a different 'Creative Corner' columnist?" Jones asked.

"I'd flip my finger and my hair and tell him to kiss my—"

"Jesus, Janet, he's still on the phone!"

A few grunts later Ms. Fresham put the phone down. "All right," she said, "just remember, when she gets here, I don't want any moans because I told you so."

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The next morning Ms. Fresham was the first one at the office, ready to meet Mary. She had her long, black messenger bag that looked like the

skin of an overripe banana, and inside she was hiding a tape recorder. Mary was going to the interview today with Mr. Blake Poll, town hero, so she was going to take the bag. Ms. Fresham wore a purple cotton dress with white lilies on the skirt and a green lace scarf with suns sewn into the fabric. Her hair was richly dyed red and trimmed with black tips, and at her neckline she had tattooed a flight of dragonflies. In another context one might've thought her the owner of a thrift store.

Jones sat at the desk in front of the office at 9:14. He wrote down the time because Ms. Fresham wanted to give a full report on Mary's work, and Mary said she'd be there "that morning." 9:14 seemed a little past morning to Ms. Fresham. It took thirteen more minutes for Mary to arrive.

The young girl strolled into the office, removing her pink sunglasses and putting them with her purse by the door. Mary said she thought it was a good day for driving, neither too sunny nor too hot, and she suggested they let her take the company convertible to visit Mr. Poll.

"I'll go the long way to Mountain Pass so we can drive through the forest," Mary said.

"If you weren't already late," said Ms. Fresham, "you could do whatever you like. Asheville has plenty of trees for you to see another time."

"It's just such a beautiful day and I haven't been home that long, being in lousy Georgia to see family." Mary never would've said this in front of her father.

"Amen to that," said Jones, raising his mug. The first time he'd agreed with the girl.

"Ms. Fresham! I nearly forgot," said Mary, rummaging through her purse on his desk, "I have your cards for this week and a piece of fudge to go with them." Every time Mary came around she brought everyone a card with a bible verse she thought they needed. Sometimes there was candy. "John 3:23. You still haven't been baptized and I don't want you to go to hell," she said.

"And here's one for you Jones, with an extra piece of fudge. You're too skinny." Jones reached through the main street of papers and took the plastic bag holding the card and dessert.

"Wouldn't this be one hell of a sitcom?" Ms. Fresham said to Jones after Mary turned away and walked to her purse again. Ms. Fresham tossed the card into the trash.

"She's right, you're probably going to hell," Jones said, "but not because you're not baptized." They both laughed, but Mary didn't seem to hear.

Mr. Hawkley had offered to bring in dessert once a week. Everyone told him no because they were all afraid he would put something in the cookies if he heard what they said about Mary. He would roll his eyes at their refusal, screw up his mouth, and turn red. Occasionally he kicked a trashcan over. "I don't ever know how to satisfy you animals. You're like a zoo that doesn't like food or attention, but somehow you get the job done. Maybe the good Lord is teaching me a lesson," he'd say and leave.

"Where's the holy water?" Jones' would ask.

"Comes out of their tap," Ms. Fresham joked.

When Mary finished passing out all the cards she brought, Ms. Fresham opened the black messenger bag and told her she would tell her about the interview if she kept quiet. She explained the story of how, before being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Mr. Blake Poll started a fund to aid the homeless in their area, giving more than two hundred families a place to live. He stayed at home now with his wife, Louisa Poll, in Mountain Pass so that his later days would be comfortable. Because of that, Ms. Fresham said, getting his quotes for her column piece had to be done with special care and respect. The story affected Mary so deeply that she began to cry, but no one else thought enough about her to do anything. She said she couldn't believe she was the only one touched by Ms. Fresham's recounting of his life and that they would do well to attend church that next Sunday.

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Mary took the black messenger back from Ms. Fresham and didn't stop until she got to the Poll's home, which took approximately an hour because she drove so slowly.

The house next door was so small and decrepit it could hardly be called a home. The one she stood at now was only slightly better. She knocked, one of those light, no-one-probably-heard-you knocks and waited. A woman appeared and without hesitation motioned her inside.

Mary entered a long, dark room with a fireplace at one end and a hospital bed in the middle. The woman, Mrs. Poll, moved to the kitchen and looked at her husband, a small, frail man in a wheelchair by the fireplace. His skin was reminiscent of textured glass, stained with the pastel colors of bruises and age. She sat a cup out on the table with water and two blue pills before anyone spoke.

"I'm Mary." She had on a pink blouse trimmed with lace at the neckline, white pants, and had pinned a yellow daisy in her blond hair. If anyone had come in, they might think someone had painted the room gray just to accent her.

"Isn't she cute?" Mrs. Poll said, leaning over to her husband. "Now

take these before you get started.”

“No I certainly won’t,” he said. “They only make me sleepy and I want to be in my right mind for this.” He motioned them away, but a sharp jerk of his hand hit the cup from her hold. They moved as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Isn’t she cute?” he asked his wife, motioning for Mary to come closer.

Mrs. Poll didn’t say anything and put the pills back in their bottle. “You’ll take these right after.”

Mary sat down opposite Mr. Poll and rummaged through her bag for a pen and notebook. Her hand stayed steady; she was always good at meeting new people. “Mr. Blake Poll, yes? I’m Mary and will be interviewing you today. Mr. Hawkey is my father,” she said as if it meant something. “I have some questions to ask you to guide you in case you need help.” She spoke loudly and didn’t break eye contact. “What motivated you to start your fundraiser?”

“Well, it was forty years ago,” he said softly, “and I myself was homeless. My sister had just hit it big time with her first novel and had some money to spare. I made clocks out of old parts so I used the money to get a proper shop. I named it Our Time.” He stared into the fire. Mrs. Poll remained seated behind them at the kitchen table. “I slept in the shop to save all the money I could. I expanded and started giving back to my friends, since all my friends were homeless then. They’d help me in the shop and soon enough a few had some money to get their own place. It took off from there,” he said. His face was emotionless and his body still except his hands trembled as he scratched his thigh.

“Where did you sleep?”

“The aristocrats had tents, but most of us just slept on benches.” The way he slurred his O’s made it hard for Mary to understand.

“He got two broken wrists and a dislocated hip from a fight for the benches,” Mrs. Poll said. Benches and tents. Benches and tents and clocks and money. Their world was built on hardtop beds and scrap metal trinkets.

“So your sister inspired you?” Mary asked.

“I wouldn’t say inspired but without her I couldn’t have started.”

“So your friends were the reason?”

“I’d like to think so. Maybe I just wanted food and a roof, but I gave that money to my friends so they could have that too.”

“God did great things for you, not your friends,” Mary said, finally starting writing.

“Oh no, I don’t believe in any God. I’ve got all I need right here.” His wife had moved to stand behind his chair, brushing what was left of his hair.

“But you couldn’t have done any of this without God.” She stopped writing and closed the notebook.

“Have you ever known someone without a home?” the old man asked. His wife cautioned him with a firm hand as he learned forward.

“My father was homeless, but God saved him and now he doesn’t want for anything.” She couldn’t look him in the eye anymore. Her father had been abandoned on the steps of Central Children’s Home of North Carolina. She thought the Polls might resemble the couple that took him home and called him Jasper even though his birth certificate said Sam. Her mother would always tear up at the story but Mary didn’t think it was any good. She said God saved her father from something bad and that’s all she thought, but now Mr. Poll had brought up some other feelings inside of her. She felt like her mother.

Mrs. Poll went into the kitchen for some juice. The cups were plastic and the tray was an unpolished copper and the sweet apple tickled her nose. She and Mary discussed better times. The wife said that, in her opinion, nothing was to blame for the way things were now. She said the way her husband acted you would think he were a saint and he’d live forever and Mary said it was no use saying that because no one lives forever. Mr. Poll sat in his chair staring into the red fire and jerked his hand at an invisible fly.

“Is there anything you want to add to the story?” Mary asked.

“I would love—” he paused. Mary had gotten used to the way he talked, holding out his L’s.

“My husband has trouble finding his words at times. He is humble and he is kind. He doesn’t want the recognition he deserves, but he deserves for everyone to know.” She stood behind her husband again, stroking his hair.

“Of course,” Mary said. “So you really don’t believe?”

“Just because we wouldn’t see you on a Sunday morning doesn’t mean we’re bad people, Ms. Hawkley,” said Ms. Poll.

“It was our time, Mary, back in the day it truly was,” the old man said.

She closed her notebook for a second time and picked up the messenger bag. She left the old house, which felt a little more like a home now. It was nearly noon, but clouds covered the sun and the ground was wet. She walked through a swirl of thick mud and recalled the times when there was

no home for her father and there was no God to her and Hell was a bedtime story. She took the long way back and drove a little faster towards *YOUR Magazine*, her thoughts settling like thick smog.

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Ms. Fresham wrote: It's closing time and she's late. She'd waited four hours more than expected. Jones was gone and the phone had stopped ringing. She left the office and grabbed for the black messenger bag that wasn't there and walked across the street to her usual coffee house.

"Cinnamon latte. Large."

"2.95. How're you, Janet?"

"Little girl's going to ruin me."

She sat down in the back and lit a cigarette. The small room calmed her like her dad's leather jacket, too big for a small girl.

She'd quietly hoped Mr. Poll would be good for Mary. Ms. Fresham was aware of Mr. Hawkley's past and the Poll's beliefs; she was a reporter after all. "Christmas Miracle: Young Mary Sees Reality" came to her. She laughed. Jones would've hit her with his morning newspaper over their cubicle divide.

She set paisley notebook and fountain pen on the table. *Mr. Hawkley, Mary's performance today*—, she started. As Ms. Fresham began her report the door opened and Mary came in with the black messenger bag around her. Neither spoke as she sat down in the same booth.

"That cigarette will kill you." Mary looked down, fondling the golden cross she wore around her neck.

"You want anything?" Ms. Fresham said.

"No."

"How'd it go?" She slid the unfinished report under a menu. Mary began to cry quietly. She threw the bag across the booth not wanting to touch it anymore. Ms. Fresham flushed red and put out the cigarette. Had she won? She leaned into the table. Mary closed her eyes and dropped the cross onto the table and just missed the cinnamon drink. "Cinnamon Cross." She found that catchier, but she didn't laugh as she sat the golden cross back on Mary's lap.

"A good God can be hard to find," Ms. Fresham said and took the black bag from its landing place on the floor. The tape recorder had run out long ago. "Off the record, babe: Keep that cross or throw it away, but first take a piece of fudge."

Dead House

Sabrina Boone

Just before a performance, the lights are dimmed and the audience sits in absolute silence. Prior to the stage lights illuminating the first scene, there is a moment's hesitation—only enough to fuel anticipation of the coming play. If it's any longer than an instant, someone in the audience will laugh or cough, and the moment is ruined.

That moment of black silence is how depression holds on to you—but its hold doesn't conclude so cleanly.

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Luckily, I won the starring role in the season's tragedy.

It's a cattle call in the ER, deciding who will star in the coming performance. The director evaluating each entry is a tired old lady, rounding her final shift before going home to crash on her sofa and watch reruns of Law and Order.

"Did you try to kill yourself?"

I thought that to be the obvious criteria for landing this role.

The next day I receive my callback, and I'm transferred to the psychiatric ward. The curtain opens and the stage lights are blinding. I can't see the audience. A caricature of a bleeding heart opens the show, fills out my paperwork for the ward, teary-eyed about how "young and lost" I am to wind up in this place.

She shoves a needle in my arm to draw out what's left of me; spurts of thick, warm blood travel into a tube that the nurses take away.

When the stage lights are out of my eyes I can see members of the audience: the nursing staff, scrutinizing patients like painted demons wreaking havoc across the stage.

I wanted to kill myself, not you, damnit.

The villains of this tragedy are not so easily seen. They're kept backstage, working as backdrops. The playwright is a crooked old man with a broken neck, dangling from the rafters of an old motel. The story is scribbled on pieces of bath tissue and scattered across the flea-infested bed. Our stagehands are twitchy crack-addicts with open sores across their faces, half-suicidal, shuffling and filing the dilapidated

thoughts the can scrounge from our minds.

My fellow actors are worn out vagabonds, searching for play-houses of their own. They only hope to rule there, instead of this stage in which they are mere heaps of flesh moving for the pleasure of the audience.

I have the pleasure of a wonderful supporting cast, for they create the true framework of this narrative: the flesh surrounding this plot of self-carnage.

A middle-aged meth dealer is the main plot device, spelling out conflict for the audience to devour.

“Why are you here?” He asks. When I don’t answer, he continues. “Let me guess... did someone hurt you? Sexual abuse, right? Did I get it right? How old were you?”

It’s the climactic moment in which my backstory is exposed to the audience!

“I was thirteen.”

“Mine was when I was six. My uncle did it,” he laughed.

“But what good would killing yourself be?” he asked, after his laughter died down.

“I wanted to send him my best regards from Hell.”

Then the introduction of more relatable characters that form the groundwork of the plot.

A woman with bipolar depression tells me I remind her of her daughter and calls me “baby girl.”

Then, a man who spends his free time watching sports on television. He becomes my regular companion, sitting with me in the mornings while I read. He encourages me to feel better.

In one of our daily group sessions I learn that a few years prior he had beaten his son half to death with a baseball bat.

During visiting hours the audience is given a moment of comic relief to break the storyline.

“Goodness, it’s horrible that you have to live with these people!”
“There are all manner of degenerates in here, aren’t there? Come on, sweetie. You’re nothing like them. You just don’t belong in here.”

Later, a pun is thrown into the script: “I feel like I’m losing my mind in here,” I say.

Cue the laugh track.

The end of the show is fast approaching when medications are forced into me like illegal steroids in a professional athlete. Another laugh track, please.

Wake up. “Vitals” check. Breakfast, meds, group time. Lunch. Meds, group time. Vitals. Dinner. Meds. Bedtime. Drugs are as common as bread on the dinner table.

“Stability” marks the falling actions of the plot. This is the word for the target I am supposed to reach in the development of this performance.

Finally, my release papers are signed and filed away. Congratulations! I am fit to return to society. I’m pushed offstage unceremoniously. The show is done.

I bow to the audience. It’s the final curtain call, but there’s no applause. It’s a dead house.

Would You like to Have it?

poetry

Margaret Shelton

When I walk, I sway my nana's hips.

The last time I saw you, you were in your momma's arms.

We sit at the kitchen table and push coins into cardboard cylinders.

Two smiles,

Five dollars,

Twenty Washingtons destined for the bank
that she puts into my hands instead.

Nobody fries okra like Ruby.

We wake up too early to make biscuits.

Strong and beautiful crooked hands knead years of deep love into dough.

I sprinkle flour, roll dough, cut circles.

"How much longer?"

"Oh," she smiles and squints at me, "Just until they look ready."

If you're not your grandma all over again!

I am five years old, and

I am twelve years old, and

I am nineteen years old, and we're under the fan on the screen porch
in the wet heat, and she's

sitting on the rocking chair in her pajamas and her rings.

I am nineteen years old, and

She asks me to sit on her lap.

"I'll squish you, Nana."

"That's alright."

God shined right through that woman.

I stand in the kitchen,

and I smile.

I hug my mom and I hug my dad and I shake hands with family I don't know,
and I am smiling,

and I hug my cousin with his red halo of hair.

As he locks me in his arms, I notice there's broken glass on the floor
because something has fallen off one of the shelves that line the walls of my body,
and I am crying
because

She was so proud of you.

Masterpiece

Mary Shelton Hornsby

Why is it that I associate you with black and white photographs?
That is, those photographs of Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn
And all the Great Ones.

You, with your coral lipstick (NO. 169)
And your bright brown eyes, just don't understand
How much you do, how often
All their round glass eyes stare at you.

The quiet hands, that Jackie voice,
No one would ever realize that behind your luminescent skin
And wide, true smile are the inner workings
Of an evolving and powerful engine,
The stops and pedals of an organ,
And the chemistry of intricate cogs and gears.
Minute details, precise and linear,
On thousands of planes, cut and refined by
Endless incisions into the blue and silver steel.

For me, promise always to wear oversized pearls and pure gold.

A Nice Cool Bath

Noah Zimmerman

After the rain has fallen and formed puddles beneath the trees,
Little black birds drift down to the ground to clean themselves.
They remind me of when we were kids in the summer,
Bounding half-dressed through the streams of the sprinkler,
Soaking in the sunlight that sizzled our faces,
And sloshing in the mud that swallowed our blistered feet.
We would scream and flap our arms, pretending we could fly
As we splashed water at the birds that actually could;
We chased them until they retreated from our turf,
When all they wanted was a nice cool bath –
Just like us.

Apology from the Mind of the Uncreative

Hayden Arrington

I suppose by now you've heard that my trash poetry
is only good enough for spoken word. Seriously.
I wrote four sonnets and that's the best I could create.
Can you believe that? At this rate
I'll stay unpublished forever.
Well "never say never" and all that jazz but
my creative consistency changes with Carolina's weather
and I need some structure in my life.

I need inspiration
you know, that creative sensation?
To branch out from limericks
Drop all the gimmicks
write something worth celebration.

I could drop the rhyme
such as in a bad haiku
I find that too crass-

The simplest form is the couplet
I simply take rhyme and double it.

Iambic stifles the creative mind
I never know if I'm doing it right.
My "dumb" simple lines are much too unkind
for the seasoned ear and the struggling sight.
I do not blame you. I cannot see it.
And so where it is hidden I'll leave it.
My "potential" they call it, as if it's true,
that I can rise above, equal to you.

The best way to end? Perhaps the epigram
The easy way out is most often a sham.

Inquiry | Inquisition

Jake Crouse

Uniform rows of conviction
confine me to their symmetry.
The white-washed blocks
enclose the room in staggering levels,
subtly breaking the conforming environment.
Two distinct patterns,
one half a block shifted from the next.

Us.
 Them.
Us.
 Them.

“Regarded as the most personal sacrament...”

Searching myself.
Mind peeking in corners,
afraid to search.
White noises rises
over the whispers.
I refuse.

“...is that of penance, or confession.”

Faces, juxtaposed, facing forward.
The ghastly blocks, glued together,
pastel shades covering bound gray areas,
hand in hand
 facing me,
 taunting me-
 red rover.

He’s nowhere in the rows.
He’s nowhere in the spaces.

“It is a process for baptized individuals...”

You can't choose who you are born to.

You can't choose anything until it's too late.

I am drowning.

Youthful innocence requires that

we play with others,

grow with others,

sing with others

commune with others,

drink juice together,

chase ghosts together,

repeat stories together.

Seven deadly sins.

Seventy times forgiven.

Stories written by dead writers,

Recited by clueless pastors and bishops

and children.

They rewrite themselves in my head.

Seven thousand questions,

Seven billion vessels

Without an answer.

“...to, again, overcome guilt...”

I know it.

He couldn't care.

She doesn't.

She asked.

I lied.

He doesn't.

Don't ask.

The priests don't recognize my voice.

The church sings with the organ.

The organ recognizes my voice

in shivering stanzas.

It mourns for me.

My pew, colder each service.

I am frozen.

I watch the pastor
break the stale bread
as the wine transfigures
into water.

“..and receive the forgiveness...”

Blank pale blocks.
Blank pale faces.
Unable to fill the blanks.
 No one is looking.
What is this feeling?
Why am I scared?
 No one is looking.
Should I repent?
Should I confess?
 No one is looking.
Is that what Adam thought?
 Someone was looking.

I am guilty.

He’s nowhere in the rows.
He’s nowhere in the spaces.

The stories of the apostles -
 found me here.
The proofs of the apologists -
 turned away.
The warnings of the apostates -
 vanished.

The mute apologies.

“...of God.”

Poetry from the Porcelain Throne

Raleigh Fowler

I have found objective truth in bathroom stalls,
flaunting the freedom of a forlorn fortress,
bare bum plastered to a toilet seat,
pasty skinned, awkward fumblings for
single-ply redemption of my shortcomings,
short-tempered contemplations found
— formed — fragilely, barriers
separating from the boisterous boasting
of college fraternity brothers.
But what kind of man am I?
Certainly no Dalai Lama.
Silent swearer of curse words
in bathroom stalls under
fluorescent light fixtures,
frightened at the forecast of
intruders in my checkerboard-tiled
fortress of solitude,
sequestered soliloquies sung
sitting serenely on the seat.

Love on Loan

Aubrey Connors

I am constantly on her desk.
My barcode massacred in a crime of passion,
one of the only selfish acts I've seen her commit.
The mark has remained year after year;
this way she is sure I'll never be taken from her.

I don't know my title
or my plot.
I only know that I am an expression of love.

Every day she holds me,
turning to her favorite parts;
secretly knowing that no part of me is truly superior to another.
This ritual, while obsessive, is not the most compulsive of her activities.

Every day
at this desk
people walk up –
some bored,
some rushed,
some unable to contain their excitement, one of my kinsmen clasped
against their chests.
And to each of these people she entrusts not only my kin,
but also a smile.

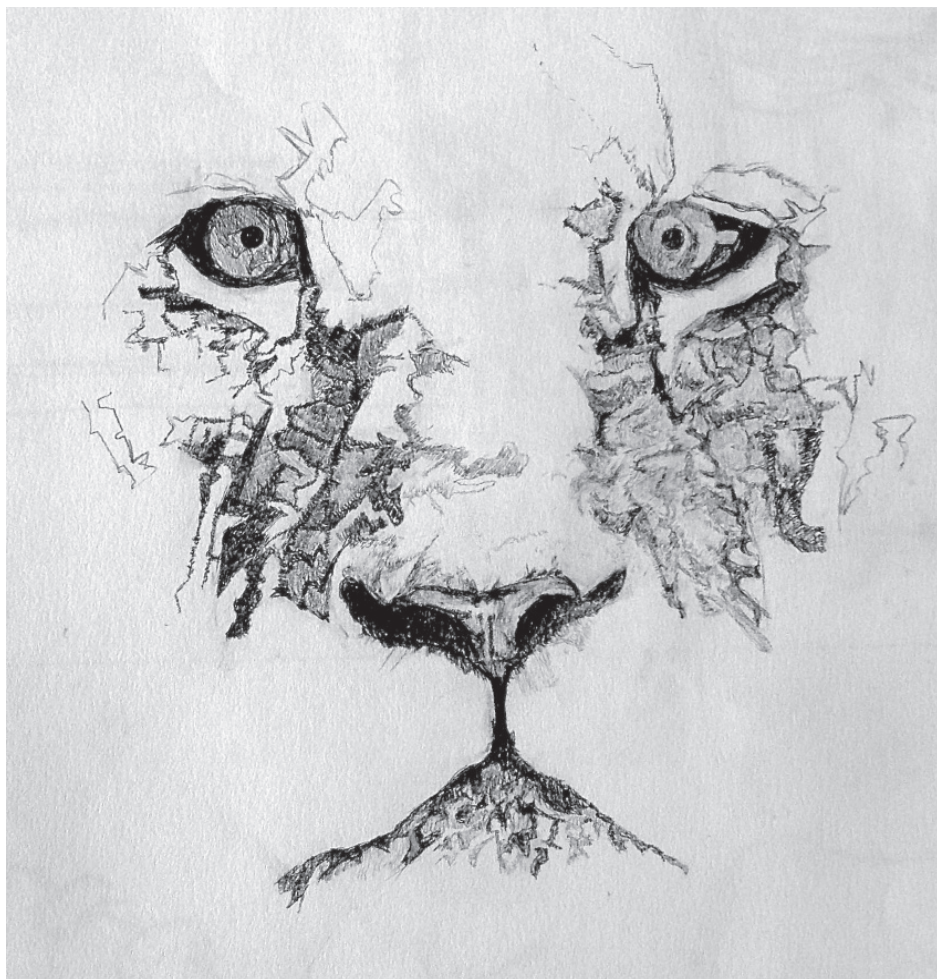
Everyone receives that simple act of joy shown through lips,
no one is beneath her smile.
Even those who are
Rude, arrogant, abusive,
silent.

Many act as if they are above it,
her smile.
Ignoring the pretty girl in glasses,
who loans out not just books,
but a secret hope,
that when they return
they too
will smile back.

A higher form of compassion I know not.
So I sit here,
and observe her dalliances.
Happy to give a little
to one who gives a lot.



Sight Unseen. Digital Photography. Kathleen Faulkner



Tiger Illustration. Graphite. Iliana Taylor



Exploring. Digital Photography. Graham Browning



Crossed. Digital Photography. Laura Krueger



Untitled. Digital Photography. Tim Sharp

